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ADDRESS

OF THE

Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada

IN CONNECTION WITH THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND,

TO THE MEMBERS OF THAT CHURCH,

ON

PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY.

Prepared by the Rev. John McKinnon, Ramsay, at the request of the Synod, and published by their order, after having been examined and approved by the Commission of Synod.

BELOVED BRETHREN!—

The Synod of our Church, while, under God, it trusts mainly to the labours of its Ministers, in their respective localities, for awakening and strengthening in you a sense of religious obligation, binding to all Christian duties, and to your duties as Parents among others, yet resolved, at its last meeting, to address you directly on your responsibility as Parents. Though parental duty be of the utmost importance, experience proves that there is a strong temptation to neglect it. It is, in fact, neglected to a woeful extent in this Province. We do not see a common fixedness of purpose and aim manifesting itself everywhere, in parental care and diligence, and issuing in one glorious result, the the enlightenment and practical guidance of the rising generation. There is an amount of injury done, and of guilt contracted, in this respect, which no language can express. In one family children are carefully instructed; in the next formally and superficially; in the next they are totally neglected; in the next they are educated to guilt and crime. What a lamentable mixture! what a miserable derangement and confusion! Who would not pity the poor, the helpless victims of so imperfect a system? They are the sufferers; they have no voice in the matter. They cannot change their circumstances; they cannot change their parents. They grow up more ignorant of religion than their fathers; they grow up without any solid convictions, or settled

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opinions, or religious habits. They stand loose to the Church of Christ. They are carried a wide step downwards in the scale of religious degeneracy, and make way for a still lower descent, in those who follow them. But will professing Christians, will Members of the Church of Christ, taking their places at a communion table, be accessary to these evils? Will *they* give ground for the charge, that *they* neglect their children? It cannot be denied, that those, who make a fair profession in other respects, often miserably fail here; and even the best might be more careful than they are. There is great need for a special communication on the subject; and, may the Lord carry this one home to the minds of you all, and give it practical effect.

The duties of parents are plain, and require only to be named, to recommend themselves to the conscience of every one, who looks at them, with candour and intelligence. They consist of family instruction, family devotion, and family government. These are means obviously conducive to one great end—the end which parents should have in view,—the eternal salvation of their children. It is for the performance of these duties, that parents are responsible. And that word *responsible* may well have a solemn sound in their ears. Responsibility carries us forward to the great day of judgment, when all our conduct, and all its effects are completed, and the whole becomes a subject of trial and decision before God and an assembled universe. And how will you stand that account if you neglect your children? Most parents have an awe upon their spirits, when they hear of their responsibility. But they frequently shut their ears that they will not hear. They despair of fulfilling their duty, and therefore avoid the full sense of their obligation. But this is the way to shift duty, not to perform it. The more proper course is to call in the aid of every consideration, that may tell upon the practice. And it is hoped you will thus act, as we proceed to show the greatness of your responsibility.

And the first consideration we shall urge, is the interest at stake. As professing Christians, you are prepared to take a proper view of these interests. You know that a child is, at once, born immortal, and a lost sinner. These facts are but dimly seen through the feebleness and helplessness of infancy. They are utterly unknown to the little subject himself. But they are not the less true, and ought not the less to be realised by parents. That tender babe has a soul of incalculable value—a soul that shall, one day, shine in all the beauties of holiness, or wear the horrid characters of matured and full grown corruption; that will, one day, rival angels in glory, or devils in degradation; that will, one day, take its flight to the mansions of eternal light and joy, or descend to the regions of utter darkness and despair. For such souls, a Saviour

bled; towards such, an ocean of divine love is directed; for such, eternal blessings are provided. This is as true of the feeble infant, that lies, passive and scarcely capable of motion, in its mother's bosom, as of the mother herself. And is that mother startled by its faintest cry? Does she spring to its assistance, on the least alarm of danger? And will she refuse to hear the cry of its immortal spirit? Will she refuse to move at the dangers that threaten its better life? Will not the precious burden, which she carries, rise to dignity in her eyes, and draw forth a deeper affection, and a more anxious care, when she remembers that she folds in her arms, a germ of immortality? The child will make no solicitation for its own soul; it will not remind her of her obligations; no remonstrance, no appeal to a parent's pity or love will ever come from its lips. Even when it is older there will be a woeful concurrence with her neglect; its lost, its corrupt nature will sanction and second all her carelessness; it will rival her utmost indifference. But ought not its silence, its innocence, to be a more moving call in the ear of affection, than its lowest importunity, its deepest anxiety? Who does not feel all the more pity for the unconscious lamb, when he sees it going, dumb and unresisting, to the slaughter?

The next consideration, we would instance, is the degree, in which the eternal interests of your children are committed to you. God has laid an awful extent of responsibility upon you, by putting your children so completely into your hands. If you are a parent, if you have a living child capable of being influenced by your conduct, these very circumstances bring a weight of obligation upon you, from which you can no more escape than you can cease to be a parent. It lies upon you every moment. Can you deny that the duty of religiously educating your children is laid upon you, and not upon another? Are not your children a charge? Are they not a charge committed to *you*? They are yours; they are in your possession; they are under your influence, continually, unavoidably. It is the will of God that they should be so. He has singled you out and laid the burden of their education for heaven on you, as plainly as if he had named you individually, and pronounced in your ears the most positive injunctions. We see that spring is the proper seed time, from its own nature; and youth proclaims equally, from its own nature, that it is the proper season for sowing the seed of religious instruction and forming religious habits. It is evident that the whole circumstances of a child's first entrance into the world, and of his early condition in it, are modified by God, in subserviene, to the acquisition of knowledge, and the formation of character. God has formed the family relation, the family constitution, and, through it all, he has wrought for the advantage of parents. He has tied you to your children

by a natural affection, which you cannot resist. He has bound them to you by an instinct almost equally strong. He has provided in you what the child wants in himself. He has made you his superior in knowledge, wisdom, energy, resolution, and strength. He puts the child into your hands, the moment it is born; he gives you the lead of all other influences; he gives you the mind of the child entirely empty that you may fill it—he has made its simplicity, its confidence, its reverence, its love, and its whole nature, to open up facilities for your success. He has made it weak in body and mind, to favour your authority and government. He has made it dependent,—consciously dependent on you, for support and protection, to render it still more at your command. He has placed it in the same house with you, often in your presence; almost always accessible, and habitually under your inspection. Its fate, its character, its habits, are linked to you, in a manner inseparable. Your neglect is its certain loss—your care, its certain gain. It is actually learning from you every day. Its character is moulding on yours. The world of parents are giving shape moral and religious to the world of children, in spite of themselves. They may prevent the shape from being a good one, but they cannot prevent it from being given, in one way or other. God has made children peculiarly open to impressions, and he has made these impressions peculiarly ineffaceable. They strike deep into the young heart, especially when they are hallowed and strengthened by every tie of endearment, that binds a child to a parent. They are laid at the foundation; they are laid, as it were, under ground, and are not easily reached by the hand of the destroyer. It is as if nature itself were partly forming in early youth; as if the image derived from the parent were not complete until the stamp of his domestic influence was communicated. What a call then do a parent's obligations, as manifested by his opportunities and advantages, and the degree in which the eternal interests of his children are suspended on his conduct, make upon him, to consult these interests in his whole deportment.

But you are not left to infer your duties from your circumstances, however clearly and certainly you may do so. There is laid before you all the responsibility involved in bringing the subjects of an express command of God. The Lord himself hath spoken, and all reasoning, excuses and objections, however plausible, must yield before his sovereign mandate. If you are Christians indeed, you will need nothing more than the explicit declaration of God's will. That will is signified to us by injunctions and examples, by God's approval of those who attend to the duties of family religion, and denunciation of those who neglect them, &c. Space will not allow us to quote; but we refer you to the following

passages. For Family Instruction, see Deut. iv. 9 and vi. 6, 7; 1 Chron. xxviii. 9; Ps. lxxviii. 5—7; Prov. xxii. 6; Eph. vi. 4. For Family Devotion, see Gen. xxviii. 1—4., and xlviii. 15, 16; Job i. 5; 2 Sam. vi. 20; Jer. x. 25; Zech. xii. 10—14. For Family Government, Discipline, Example, see Gen. xviii. 19, and xlix. 33; 1 Sam. iii. 11—14; 1 Tim. iii. 4; Prov. xix. 18, and xxii. 15, and xxix. 15—17; Col. iii. 21; Ps. ci. 2.

No language can enforce diligence, perseverence, and laborious zeal, in the work of religious education, more strongly than the word of God. He has laid a stress on it, which evidently shows, that youth is especially his own season for working. He calls upon parents to work, because he intends to work along with them. Why otherwise should he be so urgent? Why should he promise success? Why should he bind children so strictly in obedience to their parents. Why should his blessing be declared to flow down from pious parents to thousands of generations? It is a well known fact that he does work chiefly in youth. Instances of early piety are by far the most numerous; and even late conversions can very often be traced to impressions received under a parent's roof. There are few men of celebrity in the religious world, who have not acknowledged their obligations to the pious care of their parents. On the other hand, there is not a plainer case, in which God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, than in that of a neglected religious education. All means used to reclaim such children, afterwards, are often unavailing. They plunge into an element of ungodliness, out of which they never emerge, but sink deeper and deeper till death seals them over to unchangeable woe. But Christian parents are responsible, not only because God has made them so, but also by a positive act of their own. This, at least, is the case with you. On the baptism of your children, you acknowledged, you assumed all the responsibility of which we have been speaking. Your own vows and engagements constitute a new and distinct obligation, which, though many reduce it to a mere form, stands out in all its innate strength and sanctity in the judgment of God. This, you will find, when you come to answer to him for the manner in which you have fulfilled your engagements. Beware lest your own vows witness against you on the last day.

But you are responsible, not only to God, but to all whose rights and interests are affected by your conduct. You are responsible to your own conscience, which will condemn you and destroy your peace, if you live in neglect of so plain and so great a duty as that which we recommend. A heavy condemnation from your own consciences will fall upon you now; heavier when your children grow up, regardless of God and dis-

respectful to yourselves, and pass into a life of profligacy and crime; heaviest of all, when they are lost for eternity. You are responsible to other parents and children. You and your children come in, as deleterious ingredients, to poison the good effects wrought by others. You are responsible to future generations, on whom you are entailing irreligion and vice. Your evil influences may be propagated through thousands of years. You are responsible to the Church, whom you rob of her members and office-bearers. Pious families are the nurseries of the Church. With no family religion, no early seriousness, whence is the Church to get her members? Whence is she to obtain her Ministers? It is when young men are about to leave the parental roof that they usually choose a profession. With piety generally prevailing in families, a goodly proportion would be inclined to the high calling of winning souls to Christ. Our Church at this moment looks mainly to you for an increase of labourers. She regards her present want of Ministers as a sad proof of parental delinquency. The Church is languishing, Congregations are starving through the want of family religion. The young are brought up with tastes and habits altogether alien to the sacred profession, or even to common membership in the Church of Christ. You are responsible to society at large. The alienation of parents from their children, seen in the general neglect of religious obligations, paves the way for the most blasting curse, with which God visits the nations. A nation may thrive and enjoy many of the blessings of civilized life, that has never heard of Christianity. But when it has once been Christianized, and has got the mental stimulus and enlargement, which Christianity imparts, and afterwards renounces the faith, no language can describe the dreadful results. Because they like not to *retain* God in their knowledge, he gives them over to vile affections. Their unbridled passions are excited to fury and frenzy. The whole community is convulsed, and becomes a scene of riot, anarchy, and blood. Now, if parents neglect their duty to their children, religion will infallibly lose hold of the public mind; and its absence will give rise to these terrible consequences.

Upon the whole, then, it is plain that your responsibility is of the most grave and solemn kind; and it is emphatically so in this country. Here, there is a special necessity that the principles of your children should be well established in youth. Here, there is such a mixture of right principle and wrong principle producing a general laxity and indifference, that even those who were nursed in the bosom of pious families at home, and had long lived under the restraints of religion, are seen to give way and draw back unto perdition. What then can be expected of the young, who grow up untaught and uncared for, in the midst of the

unhappy influences? Fearful results will yet come out of the neglect of family religion in this Province. Saints will weep, and devils will triumph, over these results. The Church, the State, will yet have to grapple with them. Parents themselves will encounter them. Yea they are encountering some of them already. They often find themselves despised and cruelly abandoned by their own offspring; and they should receive such treatment as a just punishment for their sin, in not bringing their children under the chastening and subduing influence of religion. But, it is also to be remarked, that there are hundreds of localities in this country, that are, in a great measure, deprived of public ordinances; and how is Christianity to maintain itself there in the absence of family religion? The instructions, the devotions, the discipline and government of the family may be kept up *everywhere*; and if they are kept up they form a grand reserve, upon which religion may fall back and be upheld in remote settlements. But with no religion in the family, the consequence must be, the virtual extinction of Christianity altogether, if not immediately, yet in a very short time. We cannot, however, enlarge. But we beseech you, for conscience sake, for your children's sake, for the Church's sake, for your own sake, for God's sake, listen to these your responsibilities. If you have never begun before, begin now all your parental duties,—instruction, devotion, government. Omit none of them. Make no excuses, raise no objections. The duty is imperative; it is one of the greatest duties that lies upon you. Set the end to be attained properly before you. Seek steadfastly to reach it. Act upon a system. Be deeply in earnest—seek all needful preparation,—more knowledge, more personal religion, to fit you for the duty; think of the glorious results. And now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all,—Amen.

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